

# ***Batik*s dyed with “Chineseness”**

## **— On Ethnic Chinese and their Cultural Representation in Post-Soeharto Indonesia\***

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### **Abstract**

In the Southeast Asian Archipelago, those of Chinese origin (referred to as “ethnic Chinese” in this chapter) have long engaged in trading with, and settled in, coastal areas including Java. As the developments of mines and plantations proceeded under colonial rule in the late nineteenth century, more ethnic Chinese immigrated mainly to the Outer Islands (islands other than Java and Madura). Though fully settled for generations in these regions, they were regarded as “Foreign Orientals” under Dutch rule and were legally distinguished from “natives” such as the Javanese and the Balinese. This boundary also functioned actively in terms of occupation and social life. In the early twentieth-century Indonesia, it was “natives” that were at the center of the nationalist movement, wherein the ethnic Chinese would be regarded as “the inner Other”. These historical situations forced the ethnic Chinese to be much more conscious than other ethnic groups of where they should situate themselves in the new nation-state.

In the mid-1960s, the Soeharto regime started under the structure of the Cold-War. Giving the highest priority to the maintenance of domestic stability and economic development, the regime actively mobilized the economic resources of the ethnic Chinese while separating them from mainland China, and thoroughly suppressing “Chineseness” in order to avoid provoking native anti-ethnic Chinese sentiment. Under this so-called “Assimilation Policy”, it became extremely difficult for ethnic Chinese to transmit their culture and language inter-generationally. Meanwhile, they continued to be segregated as ethnic Chinese socio-politically, which paradoxically served to fix their ethnic identity.

The Soeharto regime fell in 1998, and the ethnic Chinese were freed from this suppression. Unlike the Javanese and the Balinese, the ethnic Chinese spread in urban areas across the country, and do not have regions

they call a homeland in Indonesia. Also, they have been labeled as “the Other” or “the foreigner” throughout modern history, and experienced a “cultural blank” over thirty years. Now that the ethnic Chinese, who occupy a unique position in this country, can express their own culture freely, what and how do they try to express it?

In this chapter, the author explores two contrasting cases in Lasem (Central Java) and Singkawang (West Kalimantan), where “Chinese elements” are being painted in different ways onto the *batiks*, the traditional wax-resist dyed fabric deemed the “essence of Indonesian culture”. Though this chapter doesn’t address the theme of Islam directly, the concrete ongoing cases and arguments pertaining to the cultural representation of the ethnic minority raised within it serve as a useful reference in understanding the cultural diversity in this area.

**Key words:** The ethnic Chinese, Indonesia, *batik*, cultural expression

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 The Growing Interest in *Batik*

In October 2009, “*batik* (Javanese wax painting)” was recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage for being a uniquely Indonesian cultural symbol drawing from a rich philosophical heritage. Then-President Yudoyono called upon all Indonesians to wear *batiks* in celebration of UNESCO’s recognition. A new tradition of wearing a *batik* shirt every Friday has since been setting in, particularly amongst public sector employees.

This was the third Indonesian intangible cultural heritage item to be added to UNESCO’s list, following “*wayang kulit* (shadow puppet theatre)” and “*kris* (traditional dagger)”. *Wayang kulit* and *kris* which had earlier international recognition, are so-called “traditional arts” or “traditional crafts”, and for many Indonesians are somewhat distant from their everyday lives. In contrast *batik*, or *batik*-like creations, are an intimate part of everyday life in Indonesia, being utilized and consumed in a wide variety of ways. UNESCO’s website explains their decision:

“The techniques, symbolism and culture surrounding hand-dyed cot-

ton and silk garments known as Indonesian *Batik* permeate the lives of Indonesians from beginning to end: infants are carried in *batik* slings decorated with symbols designed to bring the child luck, and the dead are shrouded in funerary *batik*<sup>1</sup>.”

It is well-known that the intricate designs of *batik* are drawn with wax before immersion in dye. The wax is washed off before drawing the next design with wax and immersing it in a different color dye. These steps are repeated until the multicolored patterns of *batik* are born, in a dizzying manual process. That *batik*, having a major base in Indonesia and particularly in Java, has been closely intertwined with the culture of the region is undeniable. Notably in the inland region of Java, *batik* fused with the court culture while developing into a distinct symbolic system. In the history of the northern coastal region of Java, influences from Arabia, Persia, China, Europe, and Japan were robustly incorporated into *batik*, with motifs and styles freely being chosen in its development.

The emergence of *batik* as commercial enterprise, however, is relatively new, not beginning until the mid-nineteenth century. Popularization of *batik* among those with no connections with the aristocracy or with wealth is said to have commenced sometime around the turn of the twentieth century (Sekimoto 2000: 270; 2003: 466–468). Subsequently, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, substantial growth in production and cost reduction was achieved by the use of chemical dyes and through introducing a copper stamp called “*cap*”. Innovation of this nature which could even be termed capitalistic in essence, played a major role in *batik* being embraced by the general Indonesian population to the extent that it is today described as a “tradition” (Sekimoto 1995: 42). A similar process achieved distribution of this textile beyond the regional confines of Java, to encompass the Indonesian archipelago. By the 1970s, the so-called “*batik print*”, mass-produced in factories, was being sold throughout the country. It has been argued that it was the emergence of these *batik*-like materials, mass-produced much more cheaply than cloth produced through the wax-resist dying technique, that put true ownership of *batik* in the hands of the Indonesian mass-

es (Sekimoto 2000: 270–271).

The above-described recent history of *batik* is today disguised by the term “tradition”, and *batik* has come to be perceived, from within as well as without the country, as a representation of the pure and authentic “essence of Indonesian culture”<sup>2</sup>. UNESCO’s recognition of *batik* as an Intangible Cultural Heritage mentioned earlier is symbolic of this view, and has served to promote it.

Amidst this widespread attention on *batik*, I chanced to encounter expressions of “Chineseness” on *batik* fabric in two separate regions in Indonesia. One was in Lasem in Central Java Province where, as a personal experiment of a *batik* producer, a line from Chinese poetry was depicted in Chinese characters on *batik*, and the other was in Singkawang in West Kalimantan Province where motifs such as bamboo and fans were introduced into *batik* design under the novel concept of “*Tidayu*” on the initiative of the municipal government. As is explained later in detail, the two cases are in contrast with each other in their settings: The former case was seen in one of the well-known *batik* producing-centers where ethnic Chinese have historically played a prominent role, whereas the latter case was observed in a city with a large ethnic Chinese population, though there having no notable history of *batik* production.

Of course “Chinese identity” or “Chineseness” can be expressed in many different ways, and need not be restricted to textile design (Tsuda 2011: Part 4; 2012a). However, by examining concretely the meaning of “Chineseness” being expressed on *batik*, or the “essence of Indonesian culture”, and by asking what exactly that “Chineseness” means in both cases, we are granted insight into several characteristics of the self-positioning of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia and their cultural representation.

## 1.2 The Intriguing Relationship between *Batik* and the Ethnic Chinese

The first historical fact requiring mention in discussing the relationship between *batik* and the ethnic Chinese is the founding of the Islamic Trade Association (*Sarekat Dagang Islam*) in 1910, sponsored by leading *batik* vendors in Surakarta.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the *batik* business in central Java was one of the few sectors not dominated by the ethnic Chinese. However, against the backdrop of the technological innovation described above, increasing numbers of ethnic Chinese vendors were moving into this sector. The Islamic Trade Association called for unity amongst “natives” in the name of their common faith, Islam, in order to compete with ethnic Chinese competitors who were rapidly expanding their influence. This development is of great interest in that in these early stages of first picturing and then realizing “*Bangsa Indonesia* (Indonesian Nation)”, an entity which had never existed before, the ethnic Chinese were being designated as the “Other” and that the *batik* business became a central focus as an object to protect from that “Other”; this seems to foreshadow both how the ethnic Chinese would later be singled out as the “Chinese problem” of national unity, and how *batik* would become an important component of the Indonesian cultural identity.

However, it is impossible to ignore the critical role that ethnic Chinese capital played in the process of *batik* being launched into its trajectory as an industry, as described earlier. We must not forget also that *batik* in Java’s northern coast — Lasem *batik*, which will be studied in this chapter, is distinctly representative of north coast Javanese *batik* — has been refined and nurtured by the hands of ethnic Chinese.

*Batik* which today is viewed as an embodiment of “the essence of Indonesian culture”, has thus maintained an intriguing relationship with the ethnic Chinese; a relationship which has been close yet convoluted. In view of such a history, what is the meaning of the attempts in the present post-Soeharto era, to incorporate “Chineseness” into *batik*? To answer this question, we must first obtain an overview of how the ethnic Chinese have been generally positioned in Indonesia’s modern history, particularly during the Soeharto era and the years directly preceding and following it.

In the next section, I will outline the issues concerning the peculiar social position the ethnic Chinese have been placed in Indonesia. I will take particular

note of the changes in the names used to identify the group, which is closely connected with the etching out of their identity. Following this general overview, then in Sections 3 and 4, based on my own observations in the field and gained through interviews, I will describe the current situation in two geographical areas, Lasem and Singkawang. Finally, in Section 5, I will further analyze the two case studies, which will illuminate several characteristics of the modes of cultural representation of the ethnic Chinese in the post-Soeharto era.

## **2 The Ethnic Chinese and their Cultural Positioning**

### **2.1 From “*Cina*” to “*Tionghoa*”: The Years of Nationalism**

Throughout the twentieth century, the ethnic Chinese were tossed about by the ebb and flow of history and politics, which is symbolized by changes in the names used to identify them in local languages.

Prior to the nineteenth century, the term widely used in the Archipelago including the Dutch East Indies to describe China and the ethnic Chinese is said to have been “*Cina*”, a Malay (*Melayu*) word (Coppel and Suryadinata 1970). This word, which is thought to have its origin in the name of an ancient Chinese Dynasty, still lives on today in several local languages, such as the “*Cèna*” in Madurese, and “*Cina* (*Cino*)” in Javanese.

However, starting at the end of the nineteenth century and going into the twentieth, a consciousness swelled amongst the ethnic Chinese in response to the eruption of Chinese Nationalism in Mainland China during the same period. This was a result of the structural change encompassing East Indian Chinese society, and a multitude of other factors complexly intertwined (Shiraishi 1997: 190). This tide of consciousness would later find an outlet in more concrete expressions such as a movement advocating education to promote becoming “pure Chinese”, and a movement aiming to instill “Chineseness” through religion. It was in the process of these events that the words “*Tionghok*” and “*Tionghoa*”, the Hokkien reading of the words “中国 (China)” and “中華 (Chinese)” began to appear in places such as Malay language newspapers with primarily Chinese

readership<sup>3</sup>. In the context of the impassioned discourse about “Our rightful place in society” and “Our unadulterated culture”, the words “*Tiongkok*” and “*Tionghoa*” were endowed with a mission to carry the pride of the ethnic Chinese, as well as their hope that one day they would be fairly recognized. Even more than the word “*Tenglang* (唐人)” which had been used widely by the Southeast Asian Chinese until then, these new words expressed a sense of renewed awakening and oneness as a people.

“*Tiongkok*” and “*Tionghoa*” became a self-description reflecting self-respect and a sense of belonging that they were now a part of a something larger than anything they ever knew before. The words gradually gained social acceptance in mainstream society, and in turn from around the 1920s the word “*Cina*” began to be perceived as possessing a negative connotation (Coppel and Suryadinata 1970).

## 2.2 From “*Tionghoa*” to “*Cina*”: Amidst the “Assimilation Policy”

When Indonesia achieved independence, the ethnic Chinese were forced to make a difficult decision. They were faced with the question as to how they were going to join the mission of raising up the newly born nation with the rest of the “Indonesian Nation”. This went beyond simply choosing citizenship, or deciding whether to be Chinese, Taiwanese, or Indonesian. They were being asked to choose between resolutely maintaining their “Chineseness”, or to give it up voluntarily. This starkly contrasts the Javanese and Balinese experience, for example, where people who had been collectively referred to as “natives” under colonial rule, had been simultaneously and nearly automatically positioned as “*Bangsa Indonesia asli* (trueborn Indonesians)” (Tsuda 2011: 258).

In the backdrop of this difference is a fact mentioned earlier, that in the unfolding of Indonesian nationalism, the “indigenous people” were envisaged as “Us” in a manner conforming to the colonial classification, and the ethnic Chinese were deemed to be an important “Other” within that construct.

Also, unlike the Javanese for instance, who were associated with the central

and eastern parts of Java, or the Balinese, who were associated with Bali, each positioned as an ethnic group (*suku*) representing a given area, the ethnic Chinese, though having a presence across the country in urban areas, had no territory that spanned a sizable area which they could claim as their own. It can be argued that this too is partly why the affirmation of “Chineseness” is not easily accepted as a “part (*suku*) of Indonesia”.

Another factor which is more intimately felt in everyday life, is the issue of economic disparity. As a consequence of an economic structure dating back to the colonial era, the ethnic Chinese have been generally perceived as wealthy merchants; in the context of uproarious calls for “Indonesianization of the economy”, they were described as outsiders leeching off the “Indonesian Nation”.

Such was the background of the debate during the early 1960s in which two sides engaged in debate on whether “Chineseness” should be relinquished or resolutely maintained, standing for “assimilation (*asimilasi*)” and “integration (*integrasi*)” respectively. Those advocating “assimilation” in this context were purporting that the ethnic Chinese should voluntarily abandon their “Chineseness” without a trace, blending in completely with their local communities. Proponents of “integration” on the other hand argued that the ethnic Chinese should maintain their distinctness and identity, and become a new constituent of the Indonesian Nation — a *suku* — just as the Javanese and the Balinese had. This debate which unfurled in the pages of the Indonesian language magazine *Star Weekly* is noteworthy as an event in which Chinese Indonesian intellectuals proactively debated what their own positioning should be. Tragically, this debate between the two sides would later be politicized to an extreme degree over being pro or anti-communist amidst the political environment of the last days of the Sukarno administration. In 1965, triggered by the 30 September Movement, the latter “integration” faction would be completely eradicated alongside the Communist Party of Indonesia (*PKI*) which had been hailed as the largest in the non-communist world (Sadayoshi 1996).

Soeharto, who rose to prominence in the process of quelling this incident,



eventually put the National Armed Forces under his power, and as the second President, would construct the “New Order (*Orde Baru*)”, a regime which subsequently prevailed for more than thirty years. The most important and pertinent challenge for him was to bring security and order back to the nation which was in a state of utter chaos. With respect to the ethnic Chinese, his most urgent task above all else was to eliminate the intervening influence of the Communist Party of China which had been publicly criticizing Soeharto in support of the Communist Party of Indonesia, and also to put the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia under intense surveillance so as to prevent their becoming the “fifth column of the Communist Party of China”. At the same time, increasing anti-Chinese sentiment among the so-called *Pribumi* citizens had to be kept from flaring up amidst images of “China - PKI - 30 September Movement - Destruction of order” (Takaki 1991: 344–347).

Prior to full-fledged initiatives to hammer out policies addressing these issues, a symbolic decision was made in 1966 at a convention of army officials. This decision ruled that “*Tionghok*” and “*Tionghoa*” which had been in the process of becoming accepted widely as words identifying “China” and “Chinese” respectively, were to be replaced with the single term “*Cina*” in all instances from that point on. This decision to designedly bring back the word “*Cina*”, which at the time had begun to be perceived to have a derogatory connotation, and to require its use publicly, was an exercise intending to trigger a psychological impact on both the ethnic Chinese and the *Pribumi*<sup>4</sup>.

Hence the Soeharto administration would employ the “Assimilation Policy” in engaging with the ethnic Chinese, who were now once again subjected to being called “*Cina*”. However, the term “assimilation” was no longer being used in the same way the pro “assimilation” faction who had won the earlier political battle had advocated: upholding as an ideal the idea that the ethnic Chinese should voluntarily relinquish “Chineseness” in order to make themselves acceptable as “proper Indonesians”. The term had now been appropriated by the Soeharto administration to mean something entirely different. The various measures sub-

sequently laid out in succession, on the one hand suppressing any salient expression of “Chineseness”, while on the other hand designating “*Cina*” as a target for control and surveillance, and yet still mobilizing them for economic purposes as needed, were in concordance with the government’s agenda (Tsuda 2011: 13–14).

Representative examples of policies suppressing “Chineseness” included closing Chinese schools, banning the display of any cultural elements associated with China or the Chinese, restrictions on Chinese-language newspapers, publications and printed matter, and encouraging changing Chinese-sounding names to ones that sounded more Indonesian (Winarta 2008). Around the early 1980s, the policies expanded into the domains of religion, with various regulations being imposed on Chinese temples, and official recognition of the Teaching of Confucius (Confucianism) being withdrawn (Tsuda 2011: 69–72).

Even though official “assimilation” of the ethnic Chinese into Indonesian society was being trumpeted, at sites performing resident registration, the number of “*Cina*” citizens continued to be counted separately, one by one in accordance with centralized administrative criteria<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, those who were identified in such a manner to be “*Cina*” were discriminated against time and again when going through bureaucratic procedures at public offices. In their everyday activities as well, they were kept under surveillance by the lowest tiers of the executive branch backed by the Ministry of Domestic Affairs, the military, and the police. In such ways, the policies imposed on the ethnic Chinese during the Soeharto era, at least from the point of view of the ethnic Chinese being regulated, functioned as forces that locked in and internalized a negative identity: they continued to be relentlessly labeled as “*Cina*” even after erasing their “Chineseness” completely. They could not escape the constant reminders of this negative sense of self as a “*Cina*”. Reminders aimed at them not only through government policies but also socially, for example being targeted every time a riot erupted triggered by factors such as political instability (Tsuda 2011: Part 3).

There is another important aspect which must be pointed out when consid-

ering the identity of the ethnic Chinese during the Soeharto era. It is that an objectification of “Chineseness” was propelled by regulations and systems — such as those restricting Chinese characters, Chinese names, Chinese temples and the religious practices pertaining to it — turning “Chineseness”, regarded as a thing that compelled erasure, into tangible elements. This phenomena which could be described as the “packaging of culture”, was not an occurrence uniquely pertaining to the ethnic Chinese; this development extended widely across other ethnic groups as well, in the context of the cultivation of a “national culture” (Yamashita 1998). However, whereas the “*suku* cultures” in localities such as Java and Bali were recasted as exceptional “regional cultures” open to all Indonesian people — and subsequent to undergoing packaging — would be met with enthusiastic encouragement and cultivation by the state, anything associated with the ethnic Chinese was subject to being eliminated or suppressed as an “alien cultural system (*tata budaya asing*)” not suitable for “Indonesia’s individuality (*kepribadian Indonesia*)” (Tsuda 2011: 71).

The sociologist Ariel Heryanto accurately points out that the objective of the Soeharto regime in advocating the “Assimilation Policy” was not the complete elimination of an ethnic Chinese identity, but rather to continuously reproduce “Chineseness” under careful watch while simultaneously keeping it “under erasure”<sup>6</sup> (Heryanto 1998: 104). By being tagged throughout the Soeharto era, the ethnic Chinese had now been assigned a negative value termed “*Cina*” and their objectified “Chineseness” became evermore conciously noted and conspicuous in the informal day-to-day lives.

### **2.3 From “*Cina*” to “*Tionghoa*”: Change in the Post-Soeharto Period**

In 1997 the impact of the Asian financial crisis originating in Thailand swallowed Indonesia whole and shook the foundation of the Soeharto regime which had always exhibited its achievements of advancing stability and development for the nation as its self-justification. During this period, there were frequent outbreaks of violence targeting the ethnic Chinese, and this trend came to a devastating

climax in May 1998 in Jakarta. Riots which would be remembered as the “May Tragedy (*Tragedi Mei*)” were triggered when shots were fired at student protesters demanding government reform. Riots quickly spread to a massive scale, and once again a large number of the ethnic Chinese were targeted in lootings and rapes. Unable to reverse the state of chaos which had spread across the nation in the political, economic and social domains, Soeharto announced his resignation at the end of the month, and with that the New Order was finally brought to an end.

The administrations subsequently taking over would feel the intense heat of the masses, hungry for “reformation” and “democratization” and demanding answers on what was going to be done in regard to the policies and systems responsible for bolstering authoritarian politics. Progress, though gradual, would also be made in revising policies discriminating against the ethnic Chinese, in response to strong domestic and international condemnation (Winarta 2008). This condemnation was generated by human rights concerns, heightened subsequent to the May Tragedy, but also driven by the hope to bring back the Chinese capital which had escaped out of the country following the May 1998 riots.

With this new atmosphere of openness in the air, a development emerged from within the ethnic Chinese community. Up until then they had been denied any possibility of self-expression in public spheres, and had been assigned with a negative value indifferent to their will, but now there was momentum for them to try to come out with vigorous expression of their own political and cultural views. It was also during this process that a development was generated to bring back the term “*Tionghoa*” to replace “*Cina*”, which had been considered derogatory since the early twentieth century and embedded with a negative image by being used officially throughout the Soeharto era. However, so far there has been no unified movement carried out to address the issue of what the ethnic Chinese should be called. It is also true that there are a substantial number of the ethnic Chinese for whom the term “*Cina*”, already integrated as a part of their everyday vocabulary, does not invoke such a strong sentiment. This is a ten-

dency seen particularly among the younger generation who never experienced the period when their community was being referred to as “*Tionghoa*” (Wibowo 2008: xii). However, in the current post-Soeharto period, official communications including the media generally choose the terms “*Tionggok*” and “*Tionghoa*” to connote respect for the points of view of China and the ethnic Chinese. Also, the English terms “China” and “Chinese” are beginning to be used widely for their neutral connotation.

As symbolized by this (re-)change of the term used to describe the ethnic Chinese, a result of a major change in the social landscape that occurred as the nation entered the twenty-first century, in Indonesia today a feeling is taking hold around the nation that anybody is relatively free to enjoy “Chinese culture” and “Chineseness”, which for a long time was banned from being openly exhibited in public. What is to note is that those expression and acceptance of “Chineseness” cannot necessarily be analyzed in a simple schema that assumes what is now being expressed openly following the regime change is the same “ethnic Chinese identity” that had been repressed and locked away during the Soeharto regime. That is to say, in some spheres “Chineseness” is being newly discovered and expressed in new ways with an expanded border of acceptance.

The length of this chapter would not allow for a full description of all the developments involving “Chineseness” which are now occurring in the post-Soeharto period. Therefore, in the following sections I will introduce undertakings in two separate locations — one in the town of Lasem, Central Java, and the other in the community of Singkawang, West Kalimantan — each of which plausibly suggests a rediscovery of this “Chineseness” emerging today, its expression, and a new current of its acceptance. These two cases are both unique occurrences, and are phenomena being generated within a scope limited to a narrow medium of expression, that is, on the surface of *batiks*. However, when considering both the history of the last century in relation to the positioning of *batik* as the “essence of Indonesian culture” examined in the previous section, and the positioning of “Chineseness” reviewed generally in this section as signified by changes of the

name used to describe the ethnic Chinese, the following two cases will symbolically reveal glimpses of the dynamism that exists in the cultural representation of “Chineseness” in post-Soeharto Indonesia.

### 3 “The World’s Only” *Batik* with Chinese Characters: A Case Study in Lasem

#### 3.1 Lasem *Batik*

Lasem is a small fishing town facing the Java Sea, in Rembang Regency which is situated in the northeast corner of the Central Java Province. The North Coast Road connecting Semarang, the capital of Central Java, and Surabaya, the capital of East Java, runs through the center of this town, which once flourished as a shipbuilding center, using teak wood produced inland. Today the town is a bustling hub of overland transport. This area is known for having seen settlement by ethnic Chinese since a relatively early time in history. As is apparent in the old-fashioned but stately Chinese style architecture which still today remains in large numbers, Lasem has developed as a “town of the ethnic Chinese”<sup>7</sup>.

Another aspect of the town of Lasem which cannot go unmentioned is the *batik* industry. *Batik* in this town shares the distinguishing feature of *batik* produced in other areas along the northern coastline of Java: graphic patterns and vibrant colors. Synonymous with Lasem *Batik* is “chicken blood red (*abang getih pithik*)”, a dye the *batik* in this town is particularly well-known for, which is said to have been handed down as a secret formula. Lasem *Batik* is also known for being dyed for the most part in production studios managed by ethnic Chinese owners, and as indicated by motifs such as the phoenix, quilin, dragon, butterfly, and foliage scrolls corresponding to occasions, is deeply influenced by Chinese culture<sup>8</sup>. Lasem *Batik* has been known as “*batik* of the ethnic Chinese”.

During the period of Japanese military rule and the subsequent Indonesian National Revolution leading to the nation’s independence, *batik* production in the town temporarily dwindled due to lack of supplies and uncertainty during volatile times. Production volume was thereafter recovered by targeting non-eth-

nic Chinese as primary buyers. However, from around 1970, with the distribution of *batik*-like printed material expanding in scope nationally, in addition to the added factor of a lack of successors, *batik* in this town was beginning to turn into a sunset industry.

### 3.2 Njoo Tjoen Hian’s “New Creation”

It was exactly around this time that Mr. Njoo Tjoen Hian (楊俊賢 / Sigit Witjaksono), born in Lasem in 1929, took over his father’s *batik* production studio at age forty. Married to a Javanese wife, Mr. Njoo is proud of being an example of a “mixed marriage (*pembauran*)”. Initially he left most of the work of managing the production studio to his wife — which is not at all unusual in the *batik* business — and was engaged in the operation of a separate agency business during the day. In 1994, he left the agency job following an ownership change, and began to spend much of his time on *batik* production at home.

Impacted by the Asian financial crisis in 1997, his peers in the *batik* business closed production studios one after another (Kwan et al. 2010: 40). However, Mr. Njoo and his wife, whose three daughters had already grown up and left home, had the freedom to continue *batik* production even with a marginal level of business. It was around this time that Mr. Njoo, who had become a prominent figure in the community and a board member at the local Chinese temples as well as at a private elementary school, began to accept frequent interview requests from the media, both as the face of the *batik* business which now had very few left in the area to represent it and had become a “traditional industry”, and a respected elder with great knowledge of the local “ethnic Chinese culture”.

In the beginning of 2009, Mr. Njoo having turned age eighty started a certain experiment: One which entailed merging verses of poetry written in Chinese characters into *batik* designs<sup>9</sup>.

As described earlier, Lasem *Batik* has historically been known for having been developed by ethnic Chinese producers, and having had ample Chinese elements incorporated into its designs. There was a time when it was not unusual



**Photograph 1**

**Mr. Njoo wearing his *batik* with Chinese characters, and his wife.**

for images of the dragon, the lion, *Hok Lok Siou* (福祿壽) or *Delapan Dewa* (八仙) to be dyed into *batik* for use as decorative cloths (*Tok-Wi*) to drape over altars enshrining deities or ancestors. Fabrics ordered for such religious purposes would often be additionally decorated with Chinese characters representing the names of the temple or the deities, or characters such as “福” which stands for fortune. However, such Chinese-influenced designs later became very rare, due to customer demographics shifting away from the ethnic Chinese towards the so-called *Pribumi* (Kwan et al. 2010: 39), and also because the religious tendencies of the ethnic Chinese had undergone change as oppression of ethnic Chinese culture as a whole intensified. In addition, Chinese schools had been shut down by national policy since the latter half of the 1960s, which meant that most adults in the prime of their working years or younger had no Chinese language proficiency or knowledge of Chinese characters (cf. Tsuda 2012a: 193–194).

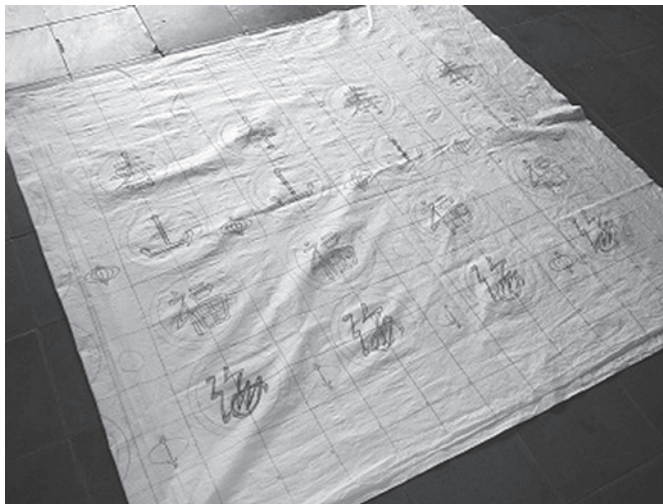
In this context Mr. Njoo’s experiment of bringing in phrases written in Chinese characters — he had at one point been taught Chinese characters during his school years — as the primary component of the design is, according to him, a completely “new creation (*kreasi baru*)”, and he proudly shared with me, “This



is the world’s only *batik* with Chinese characters, you won’t find this anywhere else”<sup>10</sup>.

The actual process is comprised of the following steps. First he draws axis lines using a pencil and ruler, to serve as a guide in positioning the designs on the white cotton fabric. Then he writes characters such as “四海之内 皆兄弟也 (Within the four seas all men are brothers)” with a pencil. After that, Javanese craftsmen who work in the production studio trace the designs with wax, as in normal *batik* producing procedures, and fill the spaces with intricate patterns in the image of traditional Javanese “World Flowers (*Sekar Jagad*)”, drawn freehand. The process of saturating this fabric in dye then washing off the wax is repeated a couple of times, and a vibrantly colorful *batik* is born.

This “new creation” began when Mr. Njoo made a *batik* incorporating phrases representing Confucius’s teachings such as “忠恕 (conscientiousness and altruism)” to use as material for his own shirt<sup>11</sup>. When the shirt was complete he wore it for the first time to a festival at a Chinese temple out of town. People walking by asked him, “Where did you buy that?”, and it generated so much attention that orders were placed on the spot upon hearing his response.



**Photograph 2**  
**The cotton fabric with Mr. Njoo’s penciled-in designs.**



**Photograph 3**  
**Craftswomen in the production studio drawing on the wax.**

According to Mr. Njoo, this *batik* with Chinese characters was something which in the beginning he had decided to try as a small personal experiment just to see what it would look like, without commercial purposes in mind. This is because *batik* to him was — even though at this point UNESCO’s decision to register it as an intangible cultural heritage had not occurred yet — without a doubt the “essence of Indonesian culture”. Furthermore, he was proud of the fact that he had always remained loyal to preserving “Lasem’s tradition”, which was handed down from his father along with the dyes and production processes. He explained to me that he therefore felt a certain degree of hesitation about fusing new “Chinese elements” with “Indonesian culture” or with “Lasem’s tradition”, both from ethical (*segi etika*) and an aesthetic (*segi estetika*) standpoints.

Then one day members of the royal court of Yogyakarta visited Rembang to partake in an official event<sup>12</sup>. After the event, the group requested to observe the current state of Lasem *Batik*. In a quick turn of events it was decided that the Regent, who was the host, would show them the production studio of Mr. Njoo, who is known as a respected elder knowledgeable about the state of *batik* in Lasem. When receiving the Regent and the royal family, Mr. Njoo intentional-

ly wore the *batik* shirt with Chinese characters mentioned earlier, and provided them with a lecture on the general history of the *batik* industry in Lasem and the production process. “By the way,” he added at the end, before explaining that he recently came up with a design incorporating Chinese characters, indicating to his shirt. Then to find out what they thought he asked them, “Is creating this kind of design not destructive to our culture (*merusak budaya*)?” They responded, “To the contrary, it is interesting and great (*menarik, malah bagus*)” showing enthusiasm for the shirt, and that is when he decided to start the production of *batik* with Chinese characters in earnest.

However as described earlier, with most of the ethnic Chinese, including those in the areas surrounding Lasem, not being able to read Chinese characters, there seemed to be little prospect that such a product would sell in large volumes. Therefore he initially started out by creating only quantities for which orders were placed. Word-of-mouth spread quickly and soon orders were coming in from out of town as well.

Interestingly enough, this *batik* with Chinese characters grew to be distributed and consumed beyond the ethnic Chinese customer base which he had at first expected the buyers to solely consist of. When I visited Mr. Njoo’s production studio in early 2010, I saw *batiks* with vibrant red and indigo Chinese characters, which had been ordered by a national elementary school for its teachers’ uniforms, swaying in the wind on the drying pole. Dyed on the *batik* were a few different four letter couplets from the “Analects (論語)”, chosen by Mr. Njoo.

“This is Confucius’s teaching, but carries a universal and wonderful message. That’s why the other day I got an order from a *Haji*<sup>13</sup>, and it just sells so well (*laku keras*) that my hands are almost full just processing the orders. But they won’t be able to understand the meanings on their own, so see, I give it to them like this, with the translation.”

Telling me that, he opened up a plastic bag with a *batik* awaiting delivery in it, taking out from inside a slender slip of paper containing the handwritten translation of the poetry verse.



**Photograph 4**  
**The dyed poetry verses.**

### **3.3 The Restating of “Chineseness” and its Acceptance**

As stated already, Lasem *Batik* has for a long time been well-known as the “*batik* of the ethnic Chinese”. The *batik* industry in Lasem fell into a period of stagnation, exactly around the half-way point of the Soeharto era when oppression against the ethnic Chinese was fully institutionalized. However this was not so much owing to the fact that the *batik* in this region was the “*batik* of the ethnic Chinese”, as it was due to Lasem sharing similar circumstances with other regional *batik* production centers which were also struggling. The common problem *batik*-producers in both Lasem and other areas were facing was the emergence of “*batik print*” in the latter half of the twentieth century. Failing to adapt to this change, they were being forced to close or scale down their operations (Sekimoto 2000: 274). Entering the 2000s, the Rembang Regency government began taking on various activities to support Lasem *Batik*, such as organizing exhibitions as part of its industrial and tourism promotion initiatives. At these events, the fact that Lasem *Batik* is not only an “authentic hand-drawn *batik* (*batik tulis asli*)”, but

also a fusion between “ethnic Chinese culture (*budaya Tionghoa*)” and the “culture of Java’s north coast (*budaya Pesisir Utara Jawa*)” is actively promoted as a positive value.

Taking place in such a context, Mr. Njoo’s “new creation” could be characterized as layering a further pronouncement of “Chineseness” onto that which already existed, and is already known to be “relating to ethnic Chinese”. In other words, the “new creation” is one which draws the “fruits of mixture between the ethnic Chinese and the Javanese” closer to the “ethnic Chinese” side. He explained this aspect of his work in an interview with a local newspaper, emphasizing that he has always remained faithful to protecting the “tradition” of the age-old dyes and classic motifs.

“As far as I can see, (Java’s) north coast *batik* has a very intimate relationship with Chinese culture (*budaya China*). So how could adding (Chinese characters) to the motifs on the material be any problem?<sup>14</sup>”

While this was his stated opinion, he was at first hesitant to express his “new creation” openly. This was because the element he was trying to add was something to do with “Chineseness” — generally deemed as unfit for “Indonesia’s individuality”. In addition, the medium he was about to add to was the surface of a *batik* — a material that represents Indonesian culture, to be precise, Javanese culture. However these apprehensions of his were resolved when an official endorsement was conveyed — even if in casual verbal form — by the Yogyakarta royal court, whose members are considered to be the personification of the highest authority of Javanese culture. As he shifted his efforts fully into commercial production, he received tangible support in the form of orders for his product from some public institutions, and individuals who could be considered representatives of the Muslim majority. This further added to Mr. Njoo’s confidence.

What makes this case in Lasem noteworthy, even more than the fact that an individual had the idea to express “Chineseness” on the surface of a fabric and make that thought a reality, are the results that followed: the fact that an act emphasizing “Chineseness” was approved of with the comment “to the contrary, it

is interesting and great”, and also that wide-spread and enthusiastic acceptance occurred on a social level.

A female Javanese purchaser who the author incidentally had the opportunity to interview stated, “Lasem *Batik* is famous for being the *batik* of the Chinese (*batik Tionghoa*), you know. (Pointing to the *batik* of the Chinese characters) We need to protect these kinds of traditional values that are unique to Lasem”. A middle-aged ethnic Chinese man who was there by chance chimed in with a smile, “I can’t read them (Chinese characters), but it would look cool to be wearing something like this”<sup>15</sup>.

I do not have sufficient data to argue how many and what sort of people these views concerning *batik* with Chinese characters represent<sup>16</sup>. However, the view expressed by the woman quoted above, as well as the description of current sales, “it just sells so well (*laku keras*)” indicates that “Chineseness” is presently being enthusiastically recognized as an indispensable component of “traditional values that are unique to Lasem”, not only by the ethnic Chinese but by others as well. Furthermore it is now being deemed acceptable to positively emphasize “Chineseness” as an attribute which enhances the value of Lasem *Batik*, without questioning to what extent the concrete expression of “Chineseness” has been entrenched in the local community, or to be more exact, the local ethnic Chinese community.

In any case, Mr. Njoo’s “new creation” has only just begun. Born out of Mr. Njoo’s informal and personal experiment to see what his idea would look like on a *batik*, what now will its dissemination look like, and in what form will its acceptance come? As far as I know, most *batik* producers in Lasem do create *batiks* in the conventional way, utilizing tradition and creativity without attempting to accentuate “Chineseness” as Mr. Njoo does. So in such a context, will *batiks* with Chinese characters, “newly created” by Mr. Njoo, become ingrained as “Lasem’s new tradition”? Or will it generate only limited and fleeting attention?<sup>17</sup> Even taking into account the undeniable fact that Mr. Njoo is advanced in years and does not have a successor, the coming developments are still a matter of great interest.



## 4 A Motif for Coexistence, “*Tidayu*”: A Case Study in Singkawang

### 4.1 The Unveiling of “*Tidayu*” Batik

It was the evening of February 27th, 2010. In a fully packed stadium in the city of Singkawang, West Kalimantan, then-Mayor Hasan Karman — the first ethnic Chinese municipal leader in this country — appeared on the central stage wearing a *batik* shirt. Drawn on the *batik* with a bright red base tone was the motif of “*Tidayu*”. This was its first unveiling on a major scale.

This night was the eve of *Cap Go Meh*, and celebrations were being held while they awaited the arrival of the fifteenth day of the Chinese New Year. Since the fall of the Soeharto regime, a lively ceremonial procession has been held in Singkawang every year on *Cap Go Meh*. On that day, spirit mediums called “*Tatung*” adorning traditional costumes of Chinese warriors or dressed as the indigenous *Dayak* are carried around the city on portable shrines in a trance state, piercing themselves in the face and body with long iron needles, and biting off the wind-pipes of live dogs and chickens<sup>18</sup>. One theory is that this festival originates from the practice of carrying around the channeled deities to fend off diseases and misfortunes. With 2010 being named the Visit West Kalimantan Year, the festival was being positioned as one of the highlights of the year, and the *Tatung* procession was being planned on an unprecedented scale. In addition to the Deputy Governor of the West Kalimantan Province and local military and police high officials, invitees of the eve celebration included some ministers from Jakarta as well as the Chinese Ambassador to Indonesia. Created especially for this felicitous occasion was the aforementioned *batik* with the “*Tidayu*” motif.

“*Tidayu*” is a portmanteau of “*Tionghoa*”, “*Dayak*”, and “*Melayu*”. According to Hasan Karman, who in 2007 became the first ethnic Chinese to be elected mayor in the nation, these three elements are the primary “*sukus*” that constitute the city of Singkawang, and that Singkawang should strive for an identity in which these three elements support and grow together in harmony while maintaining their diversity<sup>19</sup>. It was with the objective to create an original Sing-



**Photograph 5**  
The Mayor's wife exhibits the "*Tidayu*"  
*batik*.



**Photograph 6**  
An example of a "*Tidayu*" motif.

kawang *batik* to embody this ideal represented by the word "*Tidayu*", that the "*Tidayu*" *batik* contest was held at the end of 2009, hosted by the mayor's wife, Emma<sup>20</sup>.

It is fair to say that Singkawang has not had as much accumulated history in *batik* production as Java has. This however did not stop the contest from garnering almost one hundred submissions, with designs incorporating motifs representing the *Tionghoa*, *Dayak*, and *Melayu*. One of the important considerations in the evaluation process was whether the *Dayak* motifs used were those belonging to *Dayaks* residing in Singkawang in actuality, and not those belonging to other areas. Selected as the winner was a "Singkawang's *Tidayu* Motif", combining the undulating curves of a *Dayak* motif and a bamboo shoot-shaped *Melayu* motif with a *Tionghoa* motif of folding fans, bamboos, and clouds, all in a well-balanced design. By the time the 2010 *Cap Go Meh* had arrived, several prototypes based on motifs selected in this process had been completed<sup>21</sup>.



## 4.2 “Chineseness” as a Component of Municipal Identity

When compared with the previous section’s case in Lasem where Mr. Njoo’s *batik* was born out of personal exploration, what most distinguishes this case in Singkawang is that the design of the *batik*’s motif was carried out under the leadership of the municipal government. How then should we understand the fact that an element of “*Tionghoa*” — which we may call “Chineseness” — is being exhibited within the brand-new concept of “*Tidayu*”?

In order to answer this question, we must first look back at the unique history of the ethnic Chinese in this region. Around the mid-eighteenth century, a large number of ethnic Chinese of *Hakka* descent settled in West Kalimantan to partake in gold mining and formed their own “republics”. Situated at the mouth of a river, the city of Singkawang served as the gateway to the inland frontiers, attracting merchants whose settlement became key to its development. Still today, it is commonly understood that around half of the city’s population is ethnic Chinese with a *Hakka* majority, and that *Dayak* and *Melayu* follow in population size in an approximate tie<sup>22</sup>. So this is an area where, when compared to other areas in Indonesia, the ethnic Chinese have held an undeniable position both in the past and in the present. Then-Mayor Hasan Karman speaks on this topic unequivocally:

“In other areas ethnic Chinese culture (*budaya Tionghoa*) may be unfamiliar (*asing-asing*), but in Singkawang it has been a part of life for hundreds of years. Even though it was temporarily banned during the “New Order”, it came once again to be no problem to express it in Gus Dur’s time<sup>23</sup>. So the ethnic Chinese culture here in our area is not something we newly created or manipulated.”

What is being conveyed is that in this area where ethnic Chinese have historically held an important position, the customary way of treating “ethnic Chinese culture” as if it did not exist was unnatural, not the other way around. However, the method of exhibiting “ethnic Chinese culture”, a method in which it is exhibited simultaneously with other elements under the unfamiliar concept

of “*Tidayu*”, would have to be called a new creation. Why is it that a new method is being employed for the expression of ethnic Chinese identity? To understand the answer to this question, we must closely consider the fact that this expression is being advocated in the context of public initiatives led by the city government — a development that goes beyond the ethnically Chinese mayor acting on his own inspiration or initiative.

It has been customary in Indonesia for the nation’s municipalities to compete with one another based on their “local culture’s individuality”; competition which is affirmed as a factor contributing to the diversity of the “national culture”. Emphasis of such cultural expression that aims to assert the individuality of municipalities within their respective administrative frameworks seems to be increasing more than ever after the fall of the Soeharto regime, now that decentralization is being facilitated as a counter-step to the legacy of centralist authoritarian political practices. Particularly for recently formed municipalities, such as Singkawang which was born in 2001<sup>24</sup>, it was likely necessary to establish a new cultural identity to endow the administrative unit with meaning and substance, and to enliven it with distinctive color.

So now from this vantage point, let’s consider the cultural background of Singkawang: As mentioned earlier the city has had an extremely large ethnic Chinese presence historically, at a level that makes it stand out among other Indonesian areas. Even today, the ethnic Chinese account for a majority of the population. However, to publicly position ethnic Chinese elements as exclusively representing the identity of the area would be somewhat problematic. Widening our view to the whole of West Kalimantan, the province in which Singkawang City is situated, tells us why: The population ratio of the ethnic Chinese falls steeply to 9.45% when including the entire province — though this ratio is still significantly higher than the national average of 0.86%<sup>25</sup>. On the other hand the *Dayak* — who can be sub-categorized into diverse language and cultural groups — are far exceeded by the ethnic Chinese in population size when looking solely at Singkawang City, but when looking at the wider area including the hinterland

of Singkawang they are undoubtedly perceived as the “original residents (*orang asli*)”. Similarly, though the *Melayu* do not come remotely close in population size to the ethnic Chinese when looking only within Singkawang, there is a history of their wide dispersion along the coast of the archipelago including West Kalimantan. So for the *Melayu* too, the description “newcomer (*pendatang*)” is hardly fitting. Therefore regardless of the history of how the city was actually developed or its population ratio, if the ethnic Chinese — whose attributes as a “newcomer” or “minority (*minoritas*)” have been magnified for a long time in all parts of the nation — were to suddenly be singled out as having the status of “local sons (*putra daerah*)”, it is easy to imagine how much backlash would be generated. It was with such consideration that the concept of “*Tidayu*”, which exhibits ethnic Chinese elements simultaneously with the other two major elements, was born<sup>26</sup>.

This sort of expression in which “*Tionghoa*”, “*Dayak*”, and “*Melayu*” are treated as equal parts of a single unit can now be observed not only in the motifs of *batiks*, but in many areas in Singkawang. For example, the website of the city government provides an overview of the city in the following description:

“The multi-ethnic (*multi-etnis*) lives of the citizens of Singkawang are made of the combination of the three primary ethnic groups (*etnis*) — *Tionghoa* / *Cina*, *Melayu*, and *Dayak* — as well as the other various *sukus* (*suku-suku lainnya*). By these groups being side by side and maintaining harmony, unique color is infused into the daily life of the city. The cultural diversity of these ethnic groups is a distinguishing and appealing characteristic of Singkawang. The city offers many fascinating cultural events, deriving from each of these ethnic groups. These cultural events are usually celebrated on a large scale in accordance with religious holidays<sup>27</sup>.”

The picture that emerges from this description is a miniature version of Indonesia’s national motto “Unity in Diversity (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*)”, a vision of diverse elements maintaining their oneness while adding color with their individuality to the collective whole. To position the ethnic Chinese as active

contributors to the diversity of Singkawang would mean to redress the portrayal of Singkawang to one that is a more “just” reflection of its reality, starting from aspects such as its population ratio. The post-Soeharto period is bringing about a growing acceptance of the status of the ethnic Chinese and their culture throughout the nation, but to designedly and actively depict them as an indispensable part of the municipality’s identity carries a large symbolic significance in efforts to call for wide-ranging social participation of the ethnic Chinese who hold an integral place in the area. It can be expected to generate the same value in attracting investment from those who have attained economic success coming out of Singkawang<sup>28</sup>. Besides that, Singkawang’s image of possessing an “oriental nuance (*nuansa oriental*)” is becoming widely entrenched<sup>29</sup>, so for the city government that seeks to further energize development in the area of tourism by utilizing the aforementioned *Cap Go Meh*, there would be no logical way except to incorporate “Chineseness” into the city’s identity and make it a selling point.

Such is how the concept of “*Tidayu*” was born — through an act of cultural representation carried out by a municipality in the public sphere — and then realized on the surface of a *batik*. A dramatic significance can be recognized in the fact that “*Tionghoa*” was decisively incorporated in “*Tidayu*” as one of its components, when seen in the context of the modern history of this nation. On the other hand expressing Singkawang’s identity through the concept of “*Tidayu*” may have own problems that go beyond expressing “Chineseness”. Looking to Indonesia’s neighbor Malaysia where governance is based on the premise that their nation is comprised of Malay, Chinese, and Indian citizens plainly indicates to us the following: To promote the fact that the three elements, “*Tionghoa*”, “*Dayak*” and “*Melayu*” maintain harmony as one entity means also to confirm the fact that each of these ethnic groups have a tangible presence and that they are conceptually separate. In addition, there is very probable risk that with each of the three being perceived as independent groups, the diversity that exists within the individual groups could be reduced, or that the presence of minority groups other than the primary three groups could be made invisible<sup>30</sup> (Tsuda 2011: 258;

cf. Yamamoto 2006: 53, 58–59).

The Soeharto regime did not accept public mention of any antagonism which could threaten the unity of the nation. By ensuring that the individuality of a given *suku* was alternatively expressed as a “regional culture”, its radicalization would be preempted. It feels slightly ironic if not precarious, that *sukus* are becoming more explicitly defined as internal components in the context of discussing the individuality of “regions”, now in the post-Soeharto period<sup>31</sup>. “*Tidayu*” — its expression seeming to symbolize the harmonious whole on the surface of a *batik* — will undoubtedly become a critical key as to whether it will be possible to maintain a moderate representation, preventing the separation of components from leading to radicalization.

## 5 An Acceptable Cultural Representation of “Chineseness”

### 5.1 Moderate Discourse That Doesn’t “Cross the Line”

Though the case in Lasem in Section 3 and the case in Singkawang in Section 4 are both examples of undertakings in the post-Soeharto period in which the expression of “Chineseness” on the surface of *batiks* is being attempted, the two cases contrast in several ways. The most substantial difference would probably be the fact that the former had been started by an individual who simply had an idea he casually tried out, neither intending some sort of political message nor a large-scale campaign, whereas the latter had been planned as part of larger efforts of a municipality towards creating its identity. Another difference is that in Lasem a “tradition” of *batik* which had earned a relatively solid reputation had already been in existence — one even known as “*batik* of the ethnic Chinese” — and as if to add a new layer on to what was already there, a further declaration of “Chineseness” was being attempted. Whereas in Singkawang, *batik* was newly created in an environment where a “tradition” was almost nonexistent, with “Chineseness” positioned as a single element within the diversity being expressed on the surface of the *batik*.

The undertakings currently in process on the surface of *batiks* in these two

locations may count as no more than one insignificant page within the volume of monumental changes, when viewed in the larger picture of the modern history of *batik* we saw back in Section 1 of this chapter. However, that there is great relevance in the fact that the newly incorporated element was “Chineseness” in both cases is undeniable — undeniable because this was an element which had been assigned a negative value indifferent to the will of the ethnic Chinese, an element whose expression had been forbidden, and an element which the ethnic Chinese themselves had hidden away through self-imposed control for more than thirty years during the Soeharto era. The fact that expression of “Chineseness” is now occurring cannot be discussed without mentioning the transitions in the national socio-political environments which accompanied the regime change, outlined in Section 2.

It was clear however in both case studies, that the regime change bringing about more freedom in the atmosphere, does not in any way mean that openly exhibiting one’s long-suppressed “Chineseness” is now fully accepted; the presence of a certain level of hesitation and care could be observed among the individuals involved in the two cases. This could be plainly observed in Lasem through the fact that approval from members of the Javanese royal court was sought, and in Singkawang through the fact that the expression of “Chineseness” was part of an expression of diversity which involved other major ethnic groups as well.

The historian Arief Budiman indicates that, while expressions of “Chineseness” or expression as ethnic Chinese has become observable since the nation entered the post-Soeharto period, a considerable number of ethnic Chinese live with a sense of fear that if they were to assert their “Chineseness” too much the sympathy they are now receiving from the *Pribumis* could turn into backlash (Budiman 2005: 100). He observes that the “line not to cross” signifying how far they can go in asserting “Chineseness” is unclear, which adds to this hesitation.

The ban on asserting “Chineseness” has in fact been lifted. However, there is no doubt that ample consideration toward the *Pribumi* becomes indispensable

in its expression. Especially if the expression is of a more public nature, it seems what is demanded is to assert the individuality of “Chineseness” in a way conducive to coexistence with other groups, and only so long as it can contribute to the diversity of Indonesia. These types of restrictions in terms of expression are not demands posed solely on the ethnic Chinese. However, reflecting on how the ethnic Chinese were continuously questioned about their allegiance toward Indonesia in modern history, it seems inevitable that the ethnic Chinese would become particularly conscious about choosing a way of expression that stresses “Chineseness” without conflicting with “being Indonesian”, a way of expression that is moderate — in other words that doesn’t “cross the line”.

## **5.2 *Batik* as a Medium for Expression**

At this point, *batik*’s special characteristic as a medium of expression as conveyed in the case studies in this chapter should be becoming clear. It should be especially understood when considering why in Singkawang, where the *batik* industry cannot be said to have set root historically, that *batik* was specifically chosen when looking for a medium which could symbolically embody the municipality’s identity.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, *batik* has without doubt come to be perceived as the “essence of Indonesian culture”. Therefore using *batik* — or *batik*-like material — to create expressions unique to a given locality can help promote the fact that the area has a “culture” no less worthy of pride than any other. In the political context of the post-Soeharto period in which municipalities vigorously compete with one another to offer more individuality, for a newly established municipality to possess its own *batik* (pattern) carries considerable meaning<sup>32</sup>. *Batik* today has become an effective medium for these localities to express their cultural individuality.

Since *batik* is a fabric, practically speaking it would be possible to incorporate any pattern or motif desired. The “*batik* unique to the region” thus completed would be deemed a manifestation of the “essence of Indonesian culture”, no

matter how uniquely different it may be, so long as it does not vastly depart from the commonly accepted definition of *batik* — being printed material, instead of using traditional wax-resist dying method, apparently does not pose a problem in garnering this acceptance. To restate this idea, if a particular element — for example the element of “*Tionghoa*” — was to be incorporated onto the surface of a *batik* in a real-case scenario, it would be possible to assert that the very element had attained a position as a part of the diversity contributing to the “oneness of Indonesia”. As is quite apparent, this logic structure overlaps with the significance of the fact that a pavilion named “Indonesian Chinese Cultural Park (*Taman Budaya Tionghoa* Indonesia / 印華文化公園)” is being constructed on the premises of the *Taman Mini*<sup>33</sup>, where the best of Indonesian regional cultures are assembled (Kitamura 2007). *Batik* has come to have a function extremely similar to *Taman Mini*, which certifies everything it contains as “belonging to Indonesia”.

*Batik* is utilized in contemporary fashion as well, and has a side that contrasts its “traditional qualities”, allowing for unrestricted freedom in modification and arrangement. All sorts of expressions by all types of designers are being incorporated into *batiks* on a daily basis. However it is only through the following two functions which at some point in time became components of *batik* — its function as a medium enabling the expression of diverse identities of many regions, as well as its function to inscribe a guarantee that, in spite of such diversity, a given expression is yet still one “belonging to Indonesia” — that we can understand for the first time what really occurred in both case studies. That is, the fact that the city of Singkawang selected *batik* as their vehicle for creating a new identity for their municipality and didn’t encounter backlash from any direction even when incorporating the expression of “Chineseness”, and the fact that Lasem’s *batik* with Chinese characters was initiated as a personal “new creation” yet in an unexpected turn is beginning to receive wide acceptance and appreciation, transcending barriers and attracting buyers beyond the ethnic Chinese demographic.



### 5.3 What the Expression of “Chineseness” Contains

Now more than a decade after the fall of the Soeharto regime, the cultural expression of “Chineseness” is no longer deemed to be that much of a problem, so long as it is being expressed as “an inseparable part of Indonesia”. This holds true whether the expression restates and boldly emphasizes “Chineseness”, or explicitly indicates its presence as a component of the municipality’s identity. Nevertheless, in neither of the two cases studied in this chapter, was “Chineseness” one day suddenly asserted where there had been nothing before. In Lasem, the existence of “*batik* of the ethnic Chinese” had already been widely known. In Singkawang also — even though the city didn’t possess any accumulated history of *batik* production which could be spoken of — the presence of the ethnic Chinese both historically and socially was overwhelmingly strong. It is only with these foundations having already been in place that an expression of “Chineseness” as an important component of the “tradition” and “culture” in these areas — though they would not assert their areas to be “homelands of the ethnic Chinese” — has gained wide local acceptance, whether personally or publicly.

Before I end this chapter, I will add an analysis on what the substance of this “Chineseness”, moderately expressed, was actually made of.

The elements of “Chineseness” dyed on the surface of the *batik* were Chinese characters in the case of Lasem, and in Singkawang were motifs such as the folding fan, bamboo, and the cloud. There is no question that Chinese characters are a tangible symbol of “Chineseness” — maybe “evocative of China” is a more appropriate way to describe it — no matter who were to look at it. The folding fan and the bamboo too are motifs that easily trigger similar images. The pattern of the cloud as well, is reminiscent of a pattern already known in a different area (*Mega Mendung*) as a representative motif associated with “Chineseness”.

However, what warrants attention here is that Chinese characters were no longer a part of everyday life among the ethnic Chinese living in Lasem. In Singkawang also, there is no sign that the “*Tionghoa*” motif chosen was examined — to the same degree that the “*Dayak*” motif was carefully considered to ensure that

it was actually from Singkawang — to ensure that it was an ingrained part of the lives of the ethnic Chinese in Singkawang. So the expressions which were chosen in these two cases could not, without considerable reservation, be described as elements which had been fostered within the ethnic Chinese communities in the respective localities.

I have pointed out in a separate article that this expression of “Chinese culture” in the post-Soeharto period, manifest in a mood of celebration of what could be described as an “ethnic Chinese cultural renaissance” — like the lion dance, the red lantern, and Mandarin gown for example — tends to fall into the pattern of expressions packaged for easy consumption of something typically “evocative of China”, but not “evocative of the ethnic Chinese” (Tsuda 2011: 229–231). This type of indexical culture is now beginning to be distributed and consumed widely in demographics extending beyond the ethnic Chinese, simply because it somehow feels cool and pop<sup>34</sup>. However as revealed also in the case studies in this chapter, these indexical cultures that are “evocative of China” have been adopted and appropriated as elements in the context of articulating “locally fostered ethnic Chinese tradition” and “ethnic Chinese culture deeply rooted in the area”.

What inevitably gets overseen when such elements that stress indexical distinctness receive attention, are things which are difficult to visualize or package, or something which has become so much a part of the lives of the people that it can no longer be objectified. The fact that the objects which a “culture” signifies are often removed from something intimate with everyday life and have the tendency to be limited to superficial indexical elements can also be observed in other “*suku* cultures” and “regional cultures”<sup>35</sup>, which may imply that there is nothing unusual about this in the context of cultural representation in present-day Indonesia. Is this merely a legacy of how representation pertaining to “*suku* / regional cultures” was established during the Soeharto era? Or does it indicate that a substantial homogenization — or “Indonesianization” — has progressed so far in the domains of daily life that people no longer have a way to display to

each other their individualities and differences stemming from where they are from or where they live, without emphasizing indexical elements? I do not yet have the answer to this question.

What is clear though, is that the ethnic Chinese living in Indonesia have consciously objectified their “own culture” throughout the twentieth century, and have been forced to do so. They experienced an era of rapid awakening to their “own culture” through an era in which the expression of these cultures was completely banned, and an era in which the expression once again became acceptable. At each phase — as if mirroring the changes of terms describing them — the substance of the “Chineseness” which they were supposed to have, its meaning, and its very value kept being questioned. Now in the post-Soeharto period, they no longer have to deal with finger-pointing and being called “*Cina*”, and can stand proud when they speak of themselves as “*Tionghoa*” — or “Chinese”. As for the substance of the “*Tionghoa* / Chinese” culture, which for the ethnic Chinese means the very thing that should be asserted and carried with pride, it appears that they are still in the middle of its exploration.

## Acknowledgment

\* The draft of this chapter was originally presented at “International Workshop on Cultural Diversity in Southeast Asia” (September 11th, 2011) organized by Kota Kinabalu Liaison Office, ILCAA, then first appeared in Japanese version (Tsuda 2012b). This chapter was produced through substantial rewriting of it. In writing this chapter, Dr. Sekimoto Teruo generously shared his insights on the history and current state of *batik*. The data which became the basis of my description in Section 4 was acquired during my fieldwork between February 25th and March 1st 2010, with Dr. Kitamura Yumi, Dr. Matsumura Toshio (then doctoral candidate), and a journalist from *SINERGI INDONESIA*. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude.

## Notes

- 1 Cited from UNESCO’s website (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/RL/00170>).
- 2 According to Sekimoto (1995: 42), the views that *batik* is a product of elaborate

handiwork rooted in a unique tradition handed down for generations and that it must be protected and preserved were shared by many Dutch and Javanese elites living in the East Indies from around the turn of the twentieth century. However it is said that it wasn't until the 1980s and later, that the concept of *batik* as a cultural commodity rather than an industrial commodity started to become widespread and mainstream in Indonesia.

- 3 Hokkien readings of “中華” and “中国” becoming widespread was probably not unrelated to the fact that a large number of *Peranakan* Chinese who were a majority in Java were Hokkien, and that the center of distribution of print media was also in Java.
- 4 As a follow-up to the decision made in this seminar (*Seminar AD ke-II/1966*), a year later in 1967 an official notice (*Surat Edaran Presidium Kabinet Ampera tentang Masalah Tjina No.SE-06/Pres.Kab/6/67*) was released.
- 5 As a general rule, it is the bloodline principle (*jus sanguinis*) applied to one's father's lineage that determines if one is legally “*Cina*” or not. This principle was applied irrespective of whether the person was from a family which had been in Indonesia for several generations, and regardless of how strongly the person might feel his or her identity as belonging to Indonesia.
- 6 Under the Soeharto regime, the tendency to stress the “otherness” of the “ethnic Chinese”, along with “the West”, “communism”, and “Islam fundamentalism” further accelerated (Heryanto 1998: 97). Placing “under erasure” in this context analogously refers to a condition in which the word “Chineseness” is crossed out and denied (erased), yet that very act has the effect of making the characters written under the x-mark stand out, drawing more attention to them.
- 7 According to the year 2000 census, there are 3,078 ethnic Chinese — listed under the category “*Cina (WNI)*” — living in Rembang Regency (0.55% of the total population), of which a majority live in the capital of the regency, the Rembang District, and the Lasem District.
- 8 There were approximately 120 households running batik businesses in the town of Lasem in 1929, and all of these are described to have been ethnic Chinese households (Kwan et.al 2010: 37). Recently Javanese-run *batik* production studios have been established in the town of Lasem (Suyatna et al. 2010: 74–78).
- 9 The descriptions in the passages below are based on interviews conducted on February 23rd, 2010 and April 29th, 2011 at Mr. Njoo Tjoen Hian's production studio.
- 10 Since the early 2000s the *batik* industry in Lasem was on the whole entering a time of revival, partly owing to support from the local regency government. However at Mr. Njoo's production studio, both output and sales had sharply declined due to

his seasoned craftswomen being headhunted by an entrepreneur who had newly entered the market. It was during this time that one day he would pick up a pencil and put down his design on a white cloth without much thought, and this was how his *batik* with Chinese characters was born.

- 11 Mr. Njoo considers ancestor worship important, and calls himself a devout believer of the Teachings of Confucius (Confucianism). However during the Soeharto era, he could not write “Confucian (*Agama Konghucu*)” in the religion field of his resident registration certificate (*KTP*), so he wrote “Buddhist” for expedience. Confucianism came to be (re)instated as an officially approved religion in Indonesia from around 2006.
- 12 The Sultan of Yogyakarta and his family come from the lineage of the Sultanate of Mataram which was established at the end of the sixteenth century. The family is widely revered and adored to this day as protectors of the heart of Javanese culture. After Indonesia’s independence, the additional role of governor of the Special Region of Yogyakarta has been passed down through hereditary succession. The visitor on this day was GBPH Chakradiningrat, who is the half-brother of the current Sultan, Hamengkubuwana X.
- 13 *Haji* is a term of respect for a man who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, the holy city of Islam. A man referred to as a *Haji* in this context, could normally be assumed to be a devout Javanese Muslim.
- 14 Article published in *Suara Merdeka* on February 12th, 2010: “*Para Penjaga Budaya Tionghoa (1): Lestarikan Tradisi Lewat Inovasi Batik Kaligrafi*”.
- 15 Both quotes are from conversations which occurred in February 23rd, 2010, at Mr. Njoo Tjoen Hian’s production studio.
- 16 Commodities produced at Mr. Njoo’s production studio are in some cases ordered and purchased by individuals directly, but in other cases are bought by wholesalers. Therefore Mr. Njoo himself is unable to assess what kind of people these *batiks* reach at their final destination.
- 17 These *batiks* with Chinese characters are priced at thirty thousand rupiahs a piece (approximately 35 US dollars as of 2010–11 exchange rates), which is relatively reasonable for a hand-drawn *batik*. By end April 2011, two years after launching production, 375 had been sold. Interestingly enough, at the time of the author’s visit to Lasem in August 2014, a few Javanese-owned *batik* producing studios were producing the *batiks* with Chinese characters, quite similar to those of Njoo’s.
- 18 In Singkawang’s *Cap Go Meh* festival, those acting as *Tatungs* are not necessarily of ethnic Chinese background; the deities being channeled include those of *Dayak* and *Melayu* origin as well. This is why the 2010 *Cap Go Meh* festival official tourists’

brochure promotes the fact that Singkawang's *Cap Go Meh* is not merely a traditional ethnic Chinese cultural event but a unique event in which the "influence and fusion of local cultures" can be witnessed.

- 19 According to Matsumura (2013: 139–140), Hasan Karman explained that the concept of "*Tidayu*" was inspired by that of "*Cidayu*" — an abbreviation of "*Cina*", "*Dayak*" and "*Melayu*" — initially advocated in Pontianak, the capital city of the West Kalimantan Province, in the early 2000s, though the latter scheme failed to become popular. The concept of "*Tidayu*" was launched publicly at a Koran reciting contest (*musabaqah tilawatil Quran*) in 2008, where a dance consisting of the three ethnic-group elements was performed under the name of "*Tidayu* Dance (*Tarian Tidayu*)" for the first time. The subsequent account is based on an interview of the mayor of Singkawang and his wife, which took place on February 28th, 2010 at the mayor's official residence.
- 20 The mayor's wife doubles as the Singkawang Branch Director of the National Crafts Council of Indonesia (*Dewan Kerajinan Nasional*), which sponsored this contest. The National Crafts Council of Indonesia is a not-for-profit government-affiliated organization established in 1980 for the purpose of protecting cultures and raising awareness. The organization has branch offices in each of the provinces, which have subordinate offices in each regency and city. The top official in the central administration is the nation's first lady and it is stipulated that each branch office is to be headed by the wife of the municipal leader.
- 21 It should be noted that these were not *batiks* in the strict sense, as they were not made using the wax-resist method but rather were printed material produced at a factory in Jakarta. See also note 32.
- 22 Note that according to the year 2000 census, the number of ethnic Chinese in the three districts in Bengkayang Regency – which would go on to form Singkawang City – was 63,246, accounting for 41.71% of the total. The numbers of ethnic Chinese with mainland Chinese or Taiwanese citizenship were 822 and 54 respectively. Among the groups classifiable as *Melayu* (Malay), the largest group is the "*Sambas*" (7.98%) while groups whose *suku* names listed in the survey categories include the word "*Melayu*" (there are 22 such groups including "*Melayu Pontianak*") make only 1.84% of the total. The groups with numbers which stand out more are those whose origins are outside the island (though most of them were born in West Kalimantan) such as the "*Jawa*" (7.43%) and the "*Madura*" (5.29%). When looking at groups which could be considered to be *Dayak*, the very few groups with a relatively substantial population size included the "*Darat*" (5.22%) and the "*Kendayan / Kenayan*" (1.88%). Even combining the numbers of all other groups did not come

remotely close to the size of the *Dayak* population generally believed to exist. This may be explained by the number of “*Samin*” (19.99%), who are given an individual category in the survey as a *suku* of Java. It can be speculated that most *Dayak*, instead of being counted as such, were grouped together in the same survey category as “*Samin*”.

- 23 Referring to the years of Indonesia’s fourth president, Abdurrahman Wahid’s leadership (1999–2001). During his administration, laws which had come to symbolize the oppression of ethnic Chinese culture were abolished.
- 24 Singkawang was designated as the capital of Sambas Regency in 1959, but in 1999 when Bengkayang Regency separated from Sambas Regency, the former capital was incorporated into one of the districts of the new-born regency. Later in 2001, Singkawang became independent from Bengkayang Regency, and was established as a city (*kota*), upgrading its status to that equivalent to a regency.
- 25 Both figures are based on the year 2000 census. Note however that the ethnic Chinese population which was revealed in this census was far lower than most estimates.
- 26 “*Tidayu*” should be understood as a concept in which the ethnic Chinese are brought into the group which previously consisted of the *Dayak* and the *Melayu*, who had been perceived as the undisputed “local sons” in the entire West Kalimantan area. Note also that many of the ethnic Chinese living in Singkawang are of *Hakka* descent, but when expanding focus to the entire West Kalimantan region, many parts have other ethnic Chinese communities, such as those of *Teochew* (Chaozhou) descent. Diversity is very noticeable also within the *Dayak* and the *Melayu* ethnic groups, and the fact that subdivisions within these groups are deliberately not underscored is noteworthy.

On a related note, in the year 2000 census the *Dayak* group had been broken down into its subdivisions in the survey, which prevented the group from being ranked as one of the major ethnic groups of West Kalimantan. There were some voices of protest raised by *Dayak* intellectuals of the opinion that the government deliberately attempted to downgrade their position to minority status.

- 27 Cited from “*Selayang Pandang*” section in Singkawang City Government Website (<http://singkawangkota.go.id/spektakuler2012/index.php/profil-kota.html>).
- 28 The ethnic Chinese in Singkawang often leave the area as migrant workers seeking economic opportunities. In 2006, an association for such migrants from Singkawang and the neighboring area was formed with a primary membership of the ethnic Chinese living in Jakarta. Hasan Karman was the vice president of this association (*Perhimpunan Masyarakat Singkawang dan Sekitarnya* / 山口洋地區鄉親會)

until he won the 2007 mayoral election.

It is also well known that there are many cases of ethnic Chinese women in Singkawang and the neighboring area leaving to marry men in other places such as Taiwan, seeking economic betterment.

- 29 In Indonesia, the term “oriental” seems to be used to describe things containing elements reminiscent of China and its general area, in addition to — or actually more so than — the image of the Middle and Near East.
- 30 Note that the “*Melayu*”, listed as one of the three primary elements, is defined in the narrow sense as the people who live in areas including the eastern coast of Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and the coastal areas of Kalimantan who speak the Malay language. The website quoted above is most likely using the term “*Melayu*” according to this narrow definition. However, this concept of “*Melayu*” could be expanded to be inclusive of the “Malay group”, referring to the so-called Austro-nesian-speaking peoples including the Javanese and the Madurese among others. How the intended range of the term “*Melayu*” will come to be defined in its use will be dependent on the interpretation of the term by the city government and individual parties concerned. At present there appears to be a tendency for groups like the Madurese who brought about land conflict with local residents in the late 1990s — with the *Dayak* and the *Melayu* — not to be represented as bearers of the local culture, being instead deemed as “newcomers (*pendatang*)” who don’t respect local culture and customs (Hui 2007: 301–302).
- 31 Since the policy of regional autonomy was adopted in 1999, I have begun to frequently hear one’s “authenticity (*asli*)” within a given locality being wielded as a basis for arguing for preferential treatment in claiming various rights. Even while instances of the differentiation of “*pribumi*/ non-*pribumi*” — used at the national level to exclude primarily the ethnic Chinese — being heard in public places are decreasing, the labeling of a person as a “local son (*putera daerah*)” to indicate that a person is a native of a respective area, seems to be gaining increasing acceptance in regional politics. It can be argued that the fact that it is now possible in Singkawang for the ethnic Chinese to be positioned as an element within the “local son” concept is a reflection of changes taking place in the frameworks of such discrimination / differentiation.
- 32 These movements of different localities attempting to create their own unique *batiks* are not necessarily new phenomena arising for the first time in the post-Soeharto period. Even during the Soeharto era western shirts made of *batik* — often incorporating motifs of the given area — were being adopted as secondary uniforms of officials and teachers. Recently, municipality-led initiatives have been



seen to obtain patents on representative motifs of *batiks* of each region.

- 33 The national cultural park, established in 1974 in south Jakarta with the personal backing of the wife of President Soeharto. Its formal name is “*Taman Mini Indonesia Indah* (The Beautiful Indonesia Miniature Park)”. On the wide park grounds traditional houses representing all of the Indonesian provinces are exhibited. Folk art from respective provinces is displayed and sold inside the houses. The design of the pavilion representing the West Kalimantan Province incorporates as primary motifs the Malay Sultan’s palace (*Istana Kadriah*) located in the province capital, as well as a *Dayak* long house; currently it does not include any major-scale expression of ethnic Chinese elements.
- 34 In contemporary consumer society where all types of things are consumed as symbols of distinctness, it is not unusual at all in Indonesia or elsewhere to witness the phenomena of T-shirts and stickers with alphabet or *hiragana* characters strung together forming lines with no intelligible meaning, being consumed simply as a design. Chinese characters and their unique designs are no exception. Of course it is not that Chinese characters, when being accepted as interesting designs, are necessarily being associated with the actual ethnic Chinese people or China.
- 35 The process *batik* underwent in the twentieth century until being considered a cultural heritage could be restated as a process in which it became removed from daily life and objectified.

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